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After the Cinema Is Over

The chief of a European intelligence service who was visiting Washington last winter used a curious phrase to describe the negotiations, then in their final stage, between the Soviet Union and the United States on the strategic arms limitation treaty.

"That is cinema," he said. "That is what they give you to interest and distract you, while they do their serious work elsewhere."

He had brought with him to our meeting a map of the world. He pointed to Ethiopia, where the Russians had established a foothold at the outlet of the Red Sea into the Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean. He pointed across the strait to North and South Yemen, on the base of the Arabian peninsula, where Russian arms were being used by warring tribesmen.

He swung his hand upward, across Saudi Arabia and Iraq to Turkey—where there was growing unrest, in part the aftermath of the arms embargo the United States had applied

That country, he said, would surely be annexed to the Soviet empire unless the West signaled it would strongly resist such a move. And then he drew a line from Afghanistan's southern border through Pakistan—cut off from additional American weapons, because of a nuclear-proliferation dispute—to what he said was the ultimate Russian objective: a warm-water port on the Arabian Sea.

At the center of this circle, he showed me, was the Persian Gulf and the narrow Strait of Hormuz, where sinking a single ship could cut the oil lifeline on which Japan and Europe and the United States depend.

"That," he said, "is what is real to them. SALT and the rest—it is cinema to distract you."

It seemed rather melodramatic at the time, but it is not the sort of speech one can put out of mind. And now that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan has quashed the hopes of SALT's ratification—in the minds of everyone except President Carter and his spokesmen—one wonders, uncomfortably, how much else in our foreign policy is also cinema and illusion.

Is there—to ask an uncomfortable question—any reality to the administration strategy for securing the release of the hostages in Tehran? Or is it cinema? At home, we have lit lights, sung songs, sent letters and prayers. Congress, the United Nations and the World Court have affirmed the illegality of the embassy seizure. Now there is another U.N. mission to Iran, to be followed by another set of toothless sanctions.

Are we not concealing from ourselves, with this cinema, the fact that the terrorists have paid no price for their action and have been given no real incentive to release the prisoners—and release the United States from this psychological bondage?

And an even harder question to face: is there a sense in which the hostages themselves are a cinema—a preoccupation that lets us avoid the larger issues in what has occurred? Their lives are precious, but their lives have been subject to the will of others from the moment the embassy was seized without a shot.

Does a policy of patience improve their chances? It is not clear that it does. Each day in Iran brings fresh dangers of religious and tribal wars that could topple Khomeini and unleash fearful vengeance on those in the reach of his followers. He himself can be driven to extreme action by the weakness of his internal position.

It has been my belief from the first week of this crisis that when the cinema is finished, when all the resolutions have been passed—and ignored—the government of the United States will have to act, of its own will, to change the equation. For the sake of the prisoners and, equally, for the first step in salvaging a deteriorating situation in a vital part of the world, our government will have to set a deadline for retaliation. Such a deadline would force the captors and their leader to decide what price they are prepared to pay for their persistence in what is, in fact, an act of war.

That is a chilling prospect with which to begin the new year. But the cinema is about over.

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and then lifted in the Cyprus dispute. He moved southeast to Iran, where the shah had but recently been overthrown and the U.S. government was making efforts to ingratiate itself with what it took to be a moderate government.

Then east again to Afghanistan, where he said the American administration had declined to supply clandestine arms to Moslem rebels opposing the pro-Soviet puppet government.